Federal housing subsidies excluding kids from program

by Helen Gao

SAN DIEGO - A federal initiative to improve the living conditions of service members has unwittingly rendered an untold number of military households ineligible for state-subsidized preschool, which used to be free for them.

The military for the past decade has worked with private industry to build, renovate and manage base and off-base housing. However, subsidies to pay for such housing - even though they go directly to private property managers - count as income and put military families over state limits for the free program, called State Preschool.

MILITARY - Diego Zuniga played with toys at the Bay Point State Preschool at The Village at NTC in Point Loma. Eligibility restrictions have forced the school to operate below capacity. Photo by Sean M. Haffey.

MILITARY - Strict financial guidelines prevent Kent Hurlbert, the single parent of Joshua, 4, and Matthew, 6, (foreground) from sending his younger son to state-subsidized preschool. Photo by Sean M. Haffey.

Traditional military-run housing does not count as pay.

San Diego Assemblywoman Lori Saldana and the San Diego Unified School District are pushing for legislation that would largely discount the military Basic Housing Allowance as income for the purpose of preschool eligibility.

It's unknown how many military children have been disqualified because of the initiative. There are more than 16,000 Marine Corps and Navy family housing units in San Diego County that are public-private ventures, according to the Naval Facilities Engineering Command Southwest.

Statewide, more than 37,000 military housing units for the Army, Navy and Air Force are existing or pending public-private ventures, according to the Office of the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense.

Income ceilings for free State Preschool depend on the size of the family. For a family of four, the limit is $4,031 a month. Families that exceed the limits can enroll in a different state-funded program and pay according to a sliding scale.

Some preschools that serve mostly, if not exclusively, military children are struggling with enrollment shortfalls, as public-private partnerships have become more widespread.

The 11-year-old preschool at Silver Strand Elementary School in Coronado, Calif., served 48 students at its peak, but only 11 qualify for next year, said Principal Joyce Montgomery. The preschool is in the middle of privately run Navy housing for enlisted personnel, and it may close because of under-enrollment.

"We have this wonderful facility within our elementary school, and we have all of these wonderful 3- and 4-year-olds that desperately need to be there, but they can't attend," she testified at an Assembly Appropriations Committee hearing last month.

The Bay Point State Preschool at The Village at Naval Training Center in nearby Point Loma is operating well under capacity, in large part because of the housing allowance.

Kent Hurlbert, a single parent of two who lives at the former Navy boot camp, is one of those who's been turned away. He is paying $600 a month to put his 4-year-old in a child development center at nearby Dewey Elementary School.

"Right now, I am pretty stressed with my finances," he said.

At Fort Irwin in San Bernardino County, Calif., a desert outpost 35 miles from the closest town, school liaison officer Kate Nelson said families have few options if they are turned away from its state preschool.

The last time the base saw a huge deployment, Colin L. Powell State Preschool, which serves about 270 children at full capacity, was unable to fill up because many families were disqualified due a combination of hazardous-duty pay and the housing allowance.

The Appropriations Committee is expected to hold another hearing on Saldana's bill later this month. Meanwhile, parents and others are conducting a letter-writing campaign in support of the bill. Backers of the bill have set up a Web site, helpingmilitaryfamilies.com.

Saldana's bill, AB170, would subtract from a military family's income an amount equivalent to the lowest housing allowance in their geographical area. The allowance varies depending on the location and family. In San Diego, the lowest allowance is just under $1,500 per month.

Housing at a number of other California military installations, including Travis Air Force Base in Fairfield and Vandenberg Air Force Base in Santa Barbara County, are either being privatized or soon will be.

Camp Pendleton is building or renovating more than 3,000 housing units with private partners. At the San Diego Naval Base at 32nd Street, a public-private partnership will build four 18-story towers to house more than 1,800 sailors.

Sam Merrick, vice president of military affairs for Lincoln Military Housing, became emotional when he testified on behalf of the thousands of families who live in housing managed by his company.

"During this time of war, stability in a military family for the children has become more important than ever. Allowing access to state preschool will help provide needed stability, and more importantly, a strong foundation for the future," he said.

Nationwide, Lincoln manages about 24,000 military housing units, including The Village at NTC and Gateway Village, both in Point Loma; Murphy Canyon in Tierrasanta; and Camp Pendleton near Oceanside.

Congress established the Military Housing Privatization Initiative in 1996 to attract financing and expertise to build, manage and renovate military housing through public-private partnerships.

While the Saldana bill has garnered support from a long list of military organizations and districts, it also has run into resistance because of its potential financial implications.

By one estimate, it could cost the state general fund $7 million annually. However, Saldana and others disputed another estimate that put the cost in the tens of millions of dollars.

They noted that the military families in question were previously eligible for preschool, and therefore they don't represent new costs. In addition, they said existing preschools have available slots.

"We will not be taking people off the waiting list. We will not be putting these children to the front of the line and incurring any additional cost," Saldana told the Appropriations Committee.

The state is spending $392 million in the 2006-07 year to serve about 110,000 children - both military and civilian - in state preschools.

Army Col. Christopher R. Philbrick wrote on behalf of Fort Irwin in support of the bill.

Noting that military families are already giving up a great deal to have their loved ones deployed, he said "it's not right to expect them to sacrifice their children's educational opportunities."

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